Union Leadership Stands in the Way of Working People in Wisconsin

“Political rights do not originate in parliaments; they are, rather, forced upon parliaments from without. And even their enactment into law has for a long time been no guarantee of their security…

“Political rights do not exist because they have been legally set down on a piece of paper, but only when they have become the ingrown habit of a people, and when any attempt to impair them will meet with the violent resistance of the populace . Where this is not the case, there is no help in any parliamentary Opposition or any Platonic appeals to the constitution.”

– Rudolf Rocker, Anarcho-Syndicalism: Theory & Practice, 1947

In a surprise legislative maneuver last month, Republican legislators in Madison, Wisconsin, passed a bill which severely limits the collective bargaining rights of most state workers.

The move, which Democratic Senators hoped to prevent by leaving the state to prevent quorum, was pushed through by simply dividing the bill into two parts – one of which dealt specifically with collective bargaining rights, and the other simply with financial issues. State law requires that financial issues need a quorum of 3/5 of the legislature, whereas other issues – in this case, the anti-union legislation – require only a simple majority.

They have, with the stroke of a pen, destroyed state workers' right to bargain over wages that exceed inflation. They have made participating in legally protected acts of protest an offence for which you may be fired. Home health care workers, family child care workers, UW Hospitals and Clinics employees, and UW faculty and academic staff have lost their collective bargaining authority altogether, and state employees are now barred from negotiating a contract which lasts longer than a year.

All told, the bill affects nearly 175,000 state workers.

Despite its massive proportions, however, not once was the repeal of these rights mentioned in Scott Walkers' campaign for Governor. If he had, there is a good chance he may not have been elected – 53% of Wisonsin residents oppose the bill, according to even conservative pollsters.

Workers in Wisconsin, for their part, were infuriated by the passage of the bill – in response, eight thousand union members and their supporters forced their way into the capitol building, which protesters had been pushed out of only weeks before.

The Democrats – and union leadership – respond:

Democrats didn't miss a beat. While Wisconsin working people were in the midst of a battle over their livelihoods and their basic rights, the Democrats and their lapdogs in labor leadership were calmly conducting what can only be described as a fairly typical election campaign – lambasting Republicans for "going too far," and praising the Democrats for their "fab 14."

The unions, in their bid to begin reigning in workers who had only weeks before launched one of the brashest wildcat strikes in recent memory, flooded the streets of madison with speakers and petitioners to drown out the rank and filers on the ground leading chants of "strike! strike! strike!"

On every corner of the capitol, soap boxes, microphones and bullhorns could be found, each equipped with an emcee directing protestors to the nearest petitioner. Big name speakers were called in from all over the country to decry the republicans and extoll the democrats.

"We have a great president…" remarked Rev. Jesse Jackson at the capitol building. "We have a great president. But he cannot do it alone. When we do not fight, we weaken him. We do not vote… if we had used our power to vote, we would not have Mr. Walker as Governor tonight." He then paused to lead the crowd in a chant: "when we vote, we win! When we vote, we win!"

Labor leadership couldn't agree more. The Wisconsin Education Association Council issued a statement urging its members not to go to the capitol to protest, but instead to go back to work, assuring its workers that they would "not back down."

"Given the abhorrent and illegal action taken by the Senate tonight, MTI has received many calls as to whether those represented by MTI will be at work tomorrow, but rather engage in political action," MTI Executive Director John Matthews is quoted as saying in a statement. "MTI advises those it represents to report to work tomorrow. The Senate's improper and illegal action will be challenged in court."

The message was clear: workers were not to be allowed to devise their own strategy or take their own initiative in this fight. The Democrats would do that for them.

An Opportunity for the Rank and File to Rebuild the Labor Movement:

Depending on how we conduct ourselves in the months following this defeat, we may be able to look back on the events in Madison and conclude that the death of public sector unions was the best thing that ever happened to the modern labor movement. The established unions, after all, have proved to be real obstacles to workers in this country. Madison was clearly no exception.

The idea of the union, however – that workers, united by their common interests, can more effectively defend themselves together than alone – is as relevant today as it ever has been. Workers across the United States, and indeed throughout the world, are enduring the most vicious attacks on their livelihoods and rights as we've seen in years.

We need a labor movement without the stifling regulations and officials that call their workers back to work when a wildcat erupts. In fact, we not only need a labor movement that doesn't stand in the way of its own members' creativity and initiative, but one that encourages those traits. If we had that labor movement before Scott Walkers' assault began, we would be seeing a very different picture in Wisconsin today.

For the full, original article, feel free to visit the Trial by Fire.